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ABSTRACT

Student attrition and retention have been familiar terms in higher education for a long time. Recently, however, there has developed an increased awareness of the cost of attrition, both to students and to community colleges. Although research has not provided any solutions to the complex problem of attrition, studies have identified some basic characteristics that appear to be linked with attrition and retention at the community college. Among the student characteristics affecting attrition are academic factors (e.g., student's previous academic attainment), demographic factors, students' motivations and aspirations, and financial considerations. Institutional characteristics influencing attrition include the size and services of the college, student involvement, and institutional policies and procedures. The dominant theme in retention research is that retention and attrition result from the interactions that take place between the student and the institution. Steps to improve these interactions that can apply to virtually any type of institution include: (1) establish an institutionwide retention steering committee; (2) determine dropout rate; (3) conduct a study to determine why students are leaving; (4) conduct an institutional self-study to determine where improvements are necessary and where the institution is successful; and (5) institute a tangible reward system for good teaching and faculty advising. (EJV)

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# ATTRITION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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## Introduction

Student attrition and retention have been familiar terms in higher education for a long time. Until recently, most of us have been content to acknowledge that attrition existed and to accept it. Elite institutions have tended to assume that attrition is a consequence of maintaining the competitive conditions upon which their reputation depends (Pantages and Creedon 1978). Willner (1982) notes that for different reasons, community colleges with their open-door policies have come to accept attrition as an inevitable consequence of their admission policy. In most cases, retention rates have not been a concern unless drastic attrition occurred in a particular department or program, thus signaling that some type of problem existed (Cope 1975).

Today, however, there is an increased awareness of the cost of attrition, both to students and to community colleges. Students who drop out have wasted time, energy, and money; furthermore, the negative college experience may discourage them from trying again elsewhere. (of course, for some students, dropping out is a disirable and needed action, especially if they achieved their intended goals during the time they were at the community college Willner 1982). From the stand point of the institution's perspective, improving retention-reducing attrition- is one way to combat declining enrollments and the accompanying decreases in

funding that now threaten so many community colleges. In addition, Lee (1982) states that improved retention and effective recruiting enhance one another. Recruiting that attracts students who will not be happy or successful at the particular community college will adversely affect retention (Keyser 1982). Conversely, students who drop out because they are unhappy with their experience or feel the community college misled them, or both, will communicate their dissatisfaction to other students; this may hurt future recruiting.

Is Retention Good and Attrition Bad?

To assume that retention equates with success and attrition with failure poses hazards for any attrition study (Pantages and Creedon 1978). Today, when community colleges struggle to maintain enrollments and funding levels, it is no suprise to find that this misconception persists. But for any attrition or retention study to be worthwhile, this notion should be replaced with a more objective understanding of what enrollment, graduation, and other kinds of statistics really indicate, along with a commitment to develop programs that can help students reach the best decision about leaving or staying in school. (Noel 1978). Another fallacy imbedded in some attrition and retention studies is an unrealistic expectation for retention (Noel 1978). The epitome of retention perhaps, is the case of Edward Levi, who began as a kindergartner at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, progressed there

through high school, went on to complete his bachelor's and law degrees on the same campus, and eventually became the University's president. But Edward Levi's career notwithstanding, dropping out of college does not necessarily impede or preclude high achievement. William Faulkner dropped out of the University of Mississippi at the end of his freshman year; John Steinbeck attended college only briefly, and Ernest Hemingway never attended college at all. Yet each won a Nobel prize for literature. (I know of no similar examples from science and mathematics).

Factors Relating to Retention and Attrition

Although research has not provided any solutions to the complex problem of attrition, studies (Pantages and Creedon 1978; Noel 1978) have identified some basic characteristics that appear to be linked with attrition and retention at the community college.

A. Student Characteristics

1. Willner (1982) states that academic factors represent the strongest predicators of retention. The main factors predicting retention may be the level of student's previous academic attainment, and their education aspirations.
2. Cope (1975) notes that demographic factors also have a relationship to attrition. However, Cope (1975) says that this relationship to attrition is not clear for a number of these factors.
3. Pantages and Creedon (1978) mention aspiration and motivation factors as important but difficult to determine.

In their review of the literature, Pantages and Creedon (1978)

concluded that research has "failed to establish relationships among levels of motivation, commitment to the college, the strength and content of educational goals, and attrition".

4. Astin (1975) lists finacncial factors as a reason why some students drop out. Student concern about finances, finanial aid and employment are all interwoven into this equation.

B. Institutional Characteristics

According to Pantages and Creedon (1978), only in the last 15 years has research focused on the college environment and its influence on retention and attrition. The college environment is now considered a major factor in the retention or attrition of students. Institutional influences on retention and attrition can be divided into three categories: environment, student involvement, and policies and procedures of the institution (Noel 1978).

1. The environment would include image, size of the college and services.
2. According to Noel (1978) involvement is a key factor in retention.
3. Pantages and Creedon (1978) note that research is lacking on the influence of administrative policies and procedures on student attrition. In one study, students were found to persist to a greater extent when policies did not impose

punitive measures for early withdrawal.

Interactions

The dominant theme in retention research is that retention and attrition result from the interactions that take place between students and the institution. The term fit is used to describe the interaction for those who stay and lack of fit the interaction for those who leave. Fit can involve many things, but it does include meaningful contact between the student and the faculty, development of relationships between students and those who care about them, and the responsiveness of the institution to the need student feel. (Marketing the college to prospective students must involve more than merely attracting them to come and enroll, as is now being done at some schools.) Integral to the fit is the degree of discrepancy between student expectations and opportunities for realization of those expectations. According to Pantages and Creedon (1978), social interaction with the faculty is related to retention, expecially if the interaction focuses upon intellectual or course-related matters. Cope (1978) states that "the research on integrating the individual with the academic and social milieu suggests that this is where programs for retention will be most successful". Pantages and Creedon (1978) note: "The extent to which students can meet the demands of the college and derive satisfaction from doing so is the degree to which the student may be expected to

persist at the community college". The factors discussed here can enhance persistence or contribute to the dropout rationale, which eventually culminates in withdrawal from the college.

Recommendations

Much is known about the retention and attrition of students in community colleges. From the standpoint of the college, the next step after determining the factors associated with retention-attrition is to ask the question, " What can we do about it?" Despite both the multivaried factors that contribute to retention and attrition and the highly complex interrelationships among them, solutions may be less difficult to find than would first appear. The task is not to eliminate attrition, a task that is impossible and probably not desirable. Instead, the task is to assist a relatively small percentage of students to stay in college. A shift of even a few percentage points in retention statistics could benefit individual students and have a major impact on the college. According to Pantages and Creedon (1978), "colleges must design and implement effective intervention programs if they hope to minimize the attrition potential of their students". As mentioned previously, the emphasis should be on prevention rather than on prediction. Noel (1978) states that, "the goal of increased student retention can best be realized if two es ential conditions are met, First, a genuine concern about student retention and a commitment to

develop and implement retention strategies must be visible at all levels of the institution-from the Board of Trustees to part-time support staff. The second essential condition is equally comprehensive: To be effective, a retention strategy must affect all points where students interact with the college."

According to Noel (1978), giving attention to student retention will force an institution to examine itself closely, even though it may not like what it sees. Change may be necessary. "The students will persist if the institution is delivering lively, substantive learning and growth experiences". Although institutions vary, there are steps and procedures for increasing retention that can apply to virtually every type of institution. Noel (1978) lists the following:

a. Establish an institutionwide retention steering committee.
b. Determine dropout rate.
c. Conduct a dropout study to determine why students are leaving.
d. Conduct an institutional self-study to determine where the institution is successful and where it needs improvement.
e. Establish retention task committees within each of the units or departments to determine appropriate student-oriented action programs.
f. Make concerted efforts to increase faculty and staff awareness of factors related to retaining students; encourage a campuswide attitude of serving students.

g. Build a sound marketing approach into the recruiting program; recruit for retention.

h. Develop a good orientation program for entering freshman.

i. Build a student couseling and advising program from admissions through job placement.

j. Provide a special career-planning program for students who are undecided about educational major or vocational choice.

k. Provide a range of academic-support services for students with marginal academic credentials.

l. Build a so-called early warning system to identify students who are likely to drop out.

m. Set up a simple but sensitive exit-interview process.

n. Institute a tangible reward system for good teaching and faculty advising.

In addition to the specific action areas mentioned in the Noel summary above, Cope and Hannah (1975), Astin (1975c), and Pantages and Creedon (1978) offer specific recommendations, many of which overlap.

## Conclusions

For those of us concerned about attrition and retention at the community college, the future can be a bright one. There are many community colleges throughout the country that have dealt effectively with this reality. It is important that at each level within the hierarchy of the community college, that each of us maximize our concern and abilities with respect to students.

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